

## COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH FAMILIES

In order to best meet the needs of children, services are encouraged to provide environments that reflect and support the socio cultural contexts of all families within the centre. For staff to ascertain what these are, it is first necessary to establish and maintain a positive relationship with families. Although families and staff alike are generally both willing to build these partnerships, challenges such as time, language barriers and differing expectations may provide challenges. This workshop is designed to look at practical ways of overcoming these challenges in order to best meet the needs of the child, and help build positive communities within our services.

MacNaughton and Hughes (2003) have identified three different types of parent/professional relationships:

**CONFORMING:** Educators are viewed as experts who will teach families about their child's development. The Educator has all the power and knowledge in the relationship.

**REFORMING:** Families and professionals collaborate together to share information about the child. However the educator still makes the decisions about the child and is viewed as the having all the knowledge.

**TRANSFORMING:** this relationship challenges the more traditional roles between parents and professional, teachers work with parents to share information and make decisions for the child.

Encouraging Transforming relationships may be achieved in the following ways:

- Involving families in the construction of philosophies and goals for the room/setting.

- Discussing a family's values and goals for their child with them.
- Encourage families to participate in documenting the children's learning.
- Making the activities relevant to the child's socio cultural context
- Providing different ways for the family to participate in the environment.

### Preparation for new parents

Depending on the enrollments procedure at the centre, it may be helpful to do some of the following prior to, or just after the parents commence:

- Ensure that parents are given a copy of the centers policies to read, it is helpful to get parents to sign something saying that they have read and agree to the policies and procedures of the service.
- Hold an information session, or even just a meet and greet for each room
- Send to parents/or place in pockets, information about the room, include the philosophy, behavior guidance policy, planning procedure and information about staff. If you are in a kindergarten, it can be helpful to give parents some information about school readiness at this point, letting them know what to look for and that you will be discussing this issue with all parents later on in the year their child's readiness for school.
- Have the staff photo board at the sign in desk (children enjoy seeing photo's of the staff here as children or with pets here as well).
- Include a family wall near the entrance of the room, getting parents to bring photos from home can be easier said than done, a simple way of overcoming this and making sure everyone is included, is to take the photos yourself in the morning when that parents arrive (collage wall)

## Day to day communication

- Recording the children on video camera and playing the days events in the foyer at pick up and drop off time can be a very effective way of allowing parents to see what their child does, in addition to providing a platform for further conversation. If there is adequate seating this can also help foster relationships between parents. To start of with this practice is a bit labour intensive, but it can be quite easy once you get a routine going, getting parents to come in and do the filming can also be an additional way of getting them involved.
- Daily Reflections: As the time we have to do these is limited! These are ways that will encourage parents to read them and hopefully foster further communication. Do the daily reflections in a large (A3) size notebook, write in colored texta, place all the rooms notebooks in the one spot near the entrance on easels so that parents can miss them, include: drawings, collage, conversations, songs, anecdotes, photos, daily story and recipes, provide a few lines for feedback
- Greetings: Some parents are easier to talk to than others! And some parents have very little time, rather than saying what the child enjoyed, ask if they do something similar at home, for example, if Zac always plays in the sandpit instead of saying this you could ask if they have a sandpit at home, or if they had noticed this also when they were at the park. Parents also love to hear funny things that their children have said during the day (sometimes!)

## Practical ways of sharing information

Both parents and staff can find the emphasis on gathering information from home daunting! some of the following strategies can be helpful:

- Provide sheets that only require parents to fill in the blanks, for example:
- Hello everyone! My name is..... I am ..... I live with my..... etc
- For planning purposes give parents photocopied planning sheets to fill in, these can be fun in the format of a letter e.g.

Dear ( names of Carers),

This month at home I have enjoyed playing the following games.....  
My favorite songs are ..... And I CAN'T STAND..... One special thing that I did with my family was..... . I have learned some new words, they are..... My (term of primary caregiver) thinks that I would enjoy the following at crèche.....

See you later Alligator!

Johnny.

### Approaching Issues with parents

Some of the following tips may be helpful

- In the case of school readiness prepare parents early in the year, so they will be expecting you to approach them.
- Always have a solution/strategy and explanation to give to the parent where possible, always ask for the parents feedback on what you have done, for example, "Jenny has been giving some of her friends a bit of a nibble when she gets frustrated, I think its happening because....., we are trying this..... What do you think?"
- Always make a point of telling parents when you will touch base with them about this issue again, and stick to it.

### Parents who are challenging

- If you are unsure how to answer a question/problem, tell the parent you will think about it and get back to them

- Always follow up on concerns
- Determine what the real problem is and whether it is appropriate for you/the centre to be dealing with it
- Ensure that all interactions are conducted in a civil manner by both parties.

## HOW TO CREATE COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Ideally, creating or building relationships with parents/families should start when they commence at the centre/programme. It may be possible that parents will respond better to feedback that is challenging if they feel comfortable with you. The following areas have been components have been identified in forming collaborative partnerships.

- TRUST
- RECIPROCAL RESPECT
- SENSITIVITY TO DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES
- ONGOING, OPEN COMMUNICATION
- EMPATHY
- RECOGNITION OF PARTNER'S STRENGTHS
- COLLABORATION
- SHARED DECISION MAKING

(NSW DoCS, 2002b; Stonehouse & Gonzalez - Mena, 2004)

Some strategies for initiating partnerships and building relationships between parents and professionals are as follows;

- Photo boards of staff and their positions
- Social activities

- Introductory letters
- Greeting all parents and co workers consistently
- Formal and informal opportunities for parents to give feedback and information about their child.
- Opportunities for parents to participate in the programme and understand its purpose.

## REFERENCES

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